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## **Children as Vulnerable Consumers: A first conceptualisation**

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## **Abstract**

Understandings of consumer vulnerability remain contentious and despite recent developments, models remain unsuitable when applied to children. Taxonomic models, and those favouring a 'state' or 'class' based approach have been replaced by those attempting to tackle both individual and structural antecedents. However, these are still overly individualistic and fail to progress from an artificial view that these dimensions work separately and independently. In contrast the new sociology of childhood conceptualises childhood as a hybridized, fluid combination of structure and agency. This paper introduces this approach, new to the consumer vulnerability field, and proposes that it has considerable implications for the way that children's consumer vulnerability is theorised and researched, and for the formulation of policy.

**Keywords:** vulnerable consumers, children, marketing, new sociology of childhood, policy

## **Summary of statement of contribution**

This paper provides a first conceptualisation of the nature of children's vulnerability as consumers. The work reviews and critiques the evolving consumer vulnerability literature and argues for the inadequacy of existing models when applied to children. Then, drawing on the latest thinking in the 'new sociology of childhood paradigm', it outlines a new way of thinking about children as vulnerable consumers and discusses avenues for future research and policy implications.

## **Introduction**

Children are often considered a particularly vulnerable group in society to the extent that in 1990 the United Nations accorded those under 18 their own special rights under the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 2015). These rights include the right to education, to family life, and to be protected. Reflecting the view that society has a duty to protect children Kofi Annan the then UN Secretary General declared that, 'There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children'. Most countries in the world have ratified this convention with the notable exceptions of the United States of America and South Sudan.

Children are not only considered vulnerable world *citizens*; they are also seen by some as vulnerable *consumers* – particularly in relation to marketing. One UK study (Family & Parenting Institute, 2004) found that 84% of parents think that companies target children too much in marketing their products whilst a more recent survey (CIM, 2011) found that this number had grown to 90%. Perhaps reflecting this strength of public opinion the marketing literature often refers to children as vulnerable consumers as though this status were undisputed (e.g. Brusdal, 2007; Hogan, 2005; Lundby, 2013).

However, the view that children are vulnerable consumers is not universally held and there are those who believe that children are perfectly capable of holding their own in the commercial world. Marketing consultants Lindstrom and Seybold (2003) for example vaunt the empowered tween consumer: 'they are more savvy than you will ever be at understanding brands' (p.290), whilst plenty of research within the field of childhood studies emphasises their agency (Bluebond-Langner & Korbin, 2007; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Understanding the truth about the vulnerability of child consumers has become important within policy circles to the extent that in the UK a previous Labour government commissioned a panel of academic experts to conduct a year-long review of the evidence around the 'Impact of the Commercial World on Children's Wellbeing' (DCSF/DCMS, 2009),

whilst the successive Coalition (Conservative and Liberal Democrat) government commissioned a follow up report in 2011 (Bailey, 2011). The conclusion of the academic review was unfortunately inconclusive and reported that the evidence gathered 'suggests that children are neither the helpless victims imagined by some campaigners nor the autonomous 'savvy' consumers celebrated by some marketing people' (DCSF/DCMS, 2009, p.3). The vulnerability of the child consumer remains rather uncertain terrain.

Yet, unpicking the nature of this vulnerability is essential to both progress the limited body of knowledge and also in terms of policy, as warnings have recently been sounded about the link between the academic portrayal of consumer vulnerability and the way that the vulnerable are treated in policy terms (Hamilton et al., 2014; Pechmann et al., 2011).

Depending on the conceptualisation of consumer vulnerability adopted, policy suggestions can range all the way from the removal of barriers and consumer empowerment (Baker Gentry & Rittenburg, 2005) to pre-emptive, protective policies (Commuri & Ekinici, 2009).

Given that no attempts in the academy have so far been made to explore and elucidate what it means to be a vulnerable child consumer; given the divergence of views about the extent and nature of children's consumer vulnerability; and given the resulting lack of clear direction for policy response, the purpose of our paper is to present a first conceptualisation of the nature of consumer vulnerability in relation to children.

We begin by reviewing the current literature on vulnerable consumers concluding that available conceptualisations of consumer vulnerability, which mainly reference adults, cannot be easily applied to children. We contend that due to the particular nature of children's agency in relation to societal structures, children should be considered a special case. We turn to the field of childhood studies, which has long grappled with the

peculiarities of childhood, in order to seek a different lens through which to understand their vulnerability as consumers. We suggest that thinking within the very newest wave of the 'new sociology of childhood' paradigm (Prout, 2011; Prout & James, 1990/1997; Tisdall, 2012; Uprichard, 2010) provides a valuable perspective on how to conceptualise the vulnerability that child consumers can experience. We conclude that this important field can only be taken forward by using a multi-disciplinary approach to theory, research practice and policy underpinned by a conceptualisation of child consumer vulnerability that encompasses the hybridization of the 'structuring structures' (Uprichard, 2010, p.4) around children's lives and their agency as individuals. We introduce a comprehensive future research agenda and hope it will be taken up by other scholars. We draw particular attention to the substantial methodological challenges inherent in the process of adult researchers and policy makers adequately accessing and acting on the authentic voices of children.

### **Conceptualising vulnerable consumers**

We begin by locating children within the recent literature on consumer vulnerability, since beyond the ambivalence around the vulnerability of child consumers, the conceptualisation of vulnerable consumers in general, despite evolving considerably over recent years, remains highly contested (Andreasen & Manning, 1990; Baker & Mason, 2012; Halstead, Jones & Cox, 2007; Mansfield & Pinto, 2008). Early work on what was termed the 'disadvantaged consumer hypothesis' (Andreasen, 1975, p.7) saw consumer vulnerability (or 'disadvantage') in terms of the characteristics of a particular, easily identifiable set or class of citizens:

*The disadvantaged consumer hypothesis argues that the problems of disadvantaged consumers are primarily attributable to their personal characteristics, the kind of people they are. It holds that the real problem is that disadvantaged consumers are just too old, too poor, too uneducated, too unsophisticated, too definitely of the wrong race, etc., to be able to be effective consumers in the urban marketplace.*

Following this a great deal of research has investigated four specific demographic 'classes': income, education, race or ethnicity and age. Demographic approaches are about *who* experiences vulnerability in consumption, which implies that some categories of people are inherently vulnerable (Ringold, 1995; Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997). As Smith and Cooper-Martin (1997, p.6) explain, vulnerable consumers possess 'a demographic characteristic generally perceived to limit the consumer's ability to maximise utility and well-being in economic transactions'. Without exception the poor are considered more disadvantaged as consumers than the rich (Andreasen 1975, 1976, 1993; Barnhill, 1972; Morgan & Riordan, 1983). Those with less formal education are viewed as more vulnerable than the highly schooled and trained (Mitra, Hastak, Ford and Ringold, 1999; Ringold, 2005; Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997). In a US context, African American and Hispanic consumers are seen as more disadvantaged (D'Rozario & Williams, 2005; Marlowe & Atilies, 2005; Penaloza, 1995) as are those with poor native language skills (Barnhill 1972; Marlowe and Atilies, 2005). And, interestingly for our paper, most age-related research on disadvantaged consumers has concentrated on the particular vulnerability of the elderly (Andreasen, 1975, 1976; Barnhill, 1972; Morgan & Riordan, 1983).

However this 'class-based' or demographic view of disadvantage or vulnerability has been questioned by authors such as Baker et al. (2005). Their contention is that it is unhelpful to

suggest that just because someone is old or poor or of the 'wrong' race they are automatically vulnerable as consumers (p.129). Instead, Baker et al. (2005) conceptualise vulnerability as a state of individual powerlessness that everyone and anyone may experience at some point in their lifecourse:

*Consumer vulnerability is a state of powerlessness that arises from an imbalance in marketplace interactions or from the consumption of marketing messages and products. It occurs when control is not in an individual's hands, creating a dependence on external factors (e.g. marketers) to create fairness in the marketplace. The actual vulnerability arises from the interaction of individual states, individual characteristics, and external conditions within a context where consumption goals may be hindered and the experience affects personal and social perceptions of the self (p.134).*

This 'state' conceptualisation differs from Andreasen's (1975) class perspective in three ways. Firstly it shifts the focus away from a whole class of people to the individual and the self. Secondly it introduces the idea of vulnerability in the face of 'marketing messages' and thus includes consumers' information processing abilities. Thirdly it introduces the idea that vulnerability is situation dependent, for example that it results from 'an imbalance in marketplace interactions' (p.134). Below we examine in more detail each aspect of this more recent conceptualisation.

### *Individual vulnerability*

The notion of vulnerability as applicable to individuals rather than a group draws to some extent on Morgan, Schuler and Stoltman's (1995) investigation into the US courts' interpretation of vulnerable consumers across 100 years of product liability cases. They



conclude that the US courts define vulnerable consumers as those 'whose idiosyncratic sensitivities have contributed to their product-related injuries' (p.267). Morgan et al. (1995) go on to propose four particular groups of individual 'idiosyncrasies', namely physical sensitivity, physical impairment, mental impairment and lack of sophistication. Baker et al.'s (2005) refocusing on the individual and the self rather than the class also strongly reflects a large and dominant literature within the consumer research academy on the psychology of the individual consumer (John, 1999) and in particular their cognitive competences and processes. This is echoed vigorously in Ringold's (2005) interpretation of consumer vulnerability as an inability to 'navigate the marketplace' (p.202) and as manifest in limitations in individuals' decision-making capabilities. 'Vulnerable consumers fail to understand their own preferences and/or lack knowledge, skills or freedom... to act on them' (p.202). Other allusions in the consumer vulnerability literature which concur with this individual psychological approach include mentions of consumer 'powerlessness', 'anxiety' and 'coping strategies' (Broderick et al., 2011), 'lack of control' (Baker et al., 2005), 'consumer independence' (Rinaldo, 2012) and loss of 'competency and control' (Baker, 2006).

### *Vulnerability to marketing messages*

This psychological view of individual consumer vulnerability tends to visualise the lone consumer confronting the might of corporate marketing structures and in particular the information power imbalance that may ensue in the face of persuasive commercial messages. Friestad and Wright (1994, p.1) for example claim that, 'one of a consumer's primary tasks is to interpret and cope with marketers sales presentations and advertising'. Importantly for our endeavour, it is within this stream of research that the child consumer

has very often been situated. Indeed a great deal of research into children as vulnerable consumers has sought to understand whether children are capable of understanding marketing messages and what effect advertising and marketing has on them in the short and long term. The pinnacle of this approach is the child 'consumer socialisation' literature, which has sought to identify categorically at what age children have developed the various levels of cognitive capacity required to render them invulnerable to the pressures of marketing. For example John's (1999) landmark study, almost exclusively underpinned by cognitive, developmental psychology, aims principally to understand how individual children accrue - across predictable 'age-stages' (Piaget, 1960) - an increasing level of sophistication in interpreting marketing messages and operating competently and autonomously within the market place (e.g. Blades & Gunter, 2002; Chaplin & John, 2007; 2010; John, 1999; Oates, Blades and Gunter, 2002). This paradigmatic lens privileges a view of consumption as a force exerted by marketers on individual children and has tended to focus public debate on definitions of 'fair' marketing and specifically on pinpointing the age at which children are cognitively and socially capable of being 'savvy' and thus no longer 'vulnerable' to undue external commercial pressures (Cross, 2004; Langer, 2004).

Underpinned by this view, Ringold's (2005) contribution to the vulnerability literature makes the point that individual adolescent consumers are not necessarily vulnerable because, she maintains, they have the cognitive competence to 'protect' themselves. According to Ringold (2005, p.206)

*essentially, adolescents appear to understand the nature and function of advertising, brands and product categories, retail environments, and prices as a product of demand and supply.*

She goes on to cite John's (1999, p.204) assertion that adolescents exhibit sophisticated decision-making skills and abilities 'adapting strategies to ask in [an] adult-like manner' and demonstrate a 'fully developed understanding of value based on social meaning, significance and scarcity'. Ringold adds that 'John's findings are remarkably consistent with those of Berti and Bombi (1988) and a more recent review that emphasized children's understanding of their own economic and financial behavior as well as their understanding of the "adult" economy (Webley 2005; NCEE, 1999)'. This view conceptualises children as cognitive individuals who, once capable of understanding persuasive intent, are no longer vulnerable.

Of course, whilst this socialization approach is based on individual cognitive competency it is also a highly class based approach – thus posing a dilemma when trying to define consumer vulnerability in relation to children. Whilst treating the individual cognitive competence of children it implies that all children are 'automatically' not vulnerable once they have reached the 'magic age' (Nairn and Fine, 2008) when cognitive competence protects them. By corollary this approach also implies that all children are 'automatically' vulnerable before this age. This has repercussions for policy as it tends to favour blanket bans on certain forms of marketing to children below a certain age – something that flies in the face of the state based view of vulnerability.

So is there a case for a class-based view when it comes to children? Commuri and Ekici (2008) believe so. They defend Andreasen's (1975) original class based definition of disadvantaged consumers arguing that Baker et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of consumer vulnerability ignores marketplace realities and prevents proactive policy responses. They suggest that researchers should acknowledge that unscrupulous marketers may target

certain types of consumers (such as the poor with sub-prime mortgages or ethnic minorities with strong liquor (Smith & Cooper-Martin, 1997)) or children with unhealthy food. They also make the specific point that this view is desirable because when fed into policy it can facilitate, for example, the protection of the whole 'class' of children from the online advances of predatory paedophiles. Whereas a 'state' view might claim that not every child online is at risk, 'online' is, of course, where such dangers naturally exist. Therefore, they argue, 'there is clearly some usefulness in treating all children as vulnerable' (p.184). They continue by arguing that better understanding of which consumer categories may be most at risk can enable public policy decision makers to proactively establish necessary rules and regulations to protect these groups.

We can see that within this early body of consumer vulnerability literature children are simultaneously understood as individuals with age-related evolving power in the face of marketing messages but also as a class that per se is vulnerable and in need of protection by governments. Children do not slot easily into these conceptualisations and no settled view or applicable model has been identified.

### *Situational vulnerability*

This brings us to the third element of Baker et al.'s (2005) reconceptualization of consumer vulnerability; namely their acknowledgement that vulnerability occurs at the intersection of the individual with particular situations. They highlight Morgan et al.'s (1995) matrix that aligns the four individual 'idiosyncrasies' mentioned above with five situational alternatives (Belk, 1974, 1975), namely material environment, decision maker, consumption interval, usage definition and temporary conditions. This is an important step forward and provides a very valuable empirical elucidation of vulnerability in terms of product liability. However, for

the more general purposes of understanding consumer vulnerability, this matrix is somewhat hard to operationalise either for academic or policy purposes and has not been much built on over the past 20 years.

Of more interest to our inquiry is the recent thinking by Baker and Mason (2012) who have revisited the situational element of vulnerability and (drawing on Wisner, 2004) deconstructed it into three aspects: environmental, situational, and community and context. Environmental vulnerability is created by external conditions (Hill, 1995, 2001; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Penaloza, 1995). Wisner (2004) refers to this as 'taxonomic', where a range of perceived causal agents delineate different types of vulnerability. Baker and Mason (2012), citing Andreasen (1995, p.545), list the potential environmental variables that may cause vulnerability as 'lack of access to material and financial resources, living conditions, ecological characteristics, cultural values, and exploitative practices by marketers'. Researched examples include the way that resources such as health care, education and retail facilities are distributed across society (Adkins & Ozanne, 2005; Alwitt, 1996; Piacentini, Hibbert and Al-Dajani, 2001).

This updated conceptualisation of 'situational' vulnerability is presented as both dynamic and multidimensional. Powerlessness and dependence are seen as followed by resilience, blame is not fixed on any one point, and vulnerability takes in personal, social and contextual factors simultaneously:

*Vulnerability is not the property of groups or environments but as an outcome of personal, social, economic and ecological conditions. Thus whether vulnerability is experienced depends on the specific hazard (context), the characteristics of the person, and the characteristics of the situation (Baker, 2009, p.117).*

Although lauded for its relative sensitivity to the powerlessness and dependence of people (Baker & Mason, 2012) compared to the other approaches, critics have noted that the unit of analysis in this vision of vulnerability tends to be the individual, so generalizability across situations is limited (ibid). Also, this individual focus would also make policy applications almost impossible, as observed by Commuri and Ekici (2008).

Acknowledging this and seemingly in an attempt to move away from an individual focus, Baker and Mason (2012) introduce a further category; 'community and context' (termed 'contextual and proactive' by Wisner, 2004). Here, community members 'define their perceived strengths and weaknesses, and importantly, outsiders do not' (Baker, 2009, p.117). The route out of vulnerability – the emphasis of the model and its transformative agenda - is seen to lie in the empowered hands of groups of agentic people rather than in changes to social or cultural structures. The community decides what risks they need to manage and research methods strongly leaning on participatory approaches are used to explore the perspectives of different stakeholder groups and to reconstruct a system that enables access for underrepresented groups (Baker & Mason, 2012).

This perspective relates closely to the emphasis Baker et al. (2005) place on 'actual' rather than 'perceived' vulnerability; a distinction originally drawn by Smith and Cooper-Martin (1997). Baker et al. (2005) write that 'projecting onto consumers what their experience is like may be harmful' – i.e. perceived vulnerability - and that 'it is far more effective to help in the manner that they wish to be helped than in the manner that one wishes to help' (p.136). In the 'community and context' development, vulnerability has moved on from being 'state'-only to include an acknowledgement of structural (e.g. environmental and material) factors as well. In treating vulnerability as temporary and dynamic – i.e. possible to

overcome through individuals' consciousness and resilience - it also includes an emphasis on the importance of the 'voice' of individuals and groups in the alleviation of vulnerability.

Can this new conceptualisation be applied to children? We saw that children were an uneasy fit with early conceptualisations of consumer vulnerability, i.e. those related to either a whole demographic class or an individual's level of cognitive psychological development. The new 'situational' and 'community and context' ways for understanding consumer vulnerability seem to us to hold more promise than earlier and narrower 'class'-only and 'state'-only conceptualisations because they attempt to include not only an acknowledgement of the significance of structural factors but also a view of vulnerable consumers as having agency. This is particularly important for childhood given its unique place in society. From their first day, children are controlled, nurtured, conditioned, and subjected to a variety of outside forces such as those emanating from family, the law and education. Although the rigidity of many of these childhood-specific structural forces relax over time, a child's safety and protection, particularly in the early years, are entirely the responsibility of a variety of 'others'. At the same time, and indeed increasingly, children are actively encouraged to find and use their own voice; to make decisions, choices and pursue their likes and dislikes. The UNCRC, for example, includes not only a child's right to be protected but also their right to be consulted and heard. Beyond this children are active users of their own dedicated marketplace (Lindstrom and Seybold, 2003), and across a multitude of fields their agency is highly valued. Thus the treatment of 'structure' and 'agency' in a contemporary conceptualisation of childhood – and of children as vulnerable consumers - must be paramount. Indeed, childhood has been viewed in recent childhood studies literature as 'relationally constructed' by children through their agency, but also in

relation to other structural categories such as 'adulthood' and 'parenthood' (Uprichard, 2010). We turn to this literature later on.

Yet, despite the welcomed inclusion of both structure and agency, Baker and Mason's (2012) most elaborate conceptualisations of consumer vulnerability remain problematic when applied to children. The new 'situational' approach, despite claims for a 'dynamic multidimensionality' (p.545), still places heavy emphasis on the individual rather than affording any real sense of interplay between individual agency and structure as witnessed in the description of 'a person embedded in a particular situation' (p.546). Such a focus does not adequately cope with the particular characteristics of childhood, which exists at a point of fluid interplay between various dimensions, and therefore it cannot fully encapsulate the nature of childhood consumption.

The 'community and context' conceptualisation is problematic for a different reason. It requires vulnerable consumers to 'voice' their vulnerability in distinctly adult terms. The model requires consumers to 'decide' what risks they can manage (Baker, 2009, p.117), and then through a process aimed at societal change, the 'voices of those who have been silenced' are heard and those who have been marginalized are given 'an authentic voice' (Baker & Mason, 2012, p.560). This emphasis cannot easily be applied to children because when adults listen to and attempt to reproduce the voices of children for research or policy purposes (and it will surely be adults and not children who do this) then ascertaining the 'authenticity' of those voices is highly problematic. Their voices – in the participatory sense suggested by Baker and Mason - may not be an adequate access point to gauge their vulnerability. For example, Grier and Kumyanika (2008, p.1616) highlight evidence that 'food and beverage marketing influences the preferences and purchase requests of children';



children can be vulnerable to obesity yet actively request junk food. There are times when children are not aware of, and are not motivated to voice or change, their own vulnerability as a consumer; conditions which are implicit in the 'community and context' approach.

The fallibility, and subsequent ethical and representational dangers of children's 'voices' in participatory research has not gone unnoticed. Malaguzzi (1993) talks of a 'hundred languages of children' whilst others note that a child's apparent unwillingness to take part in research – according to adult-imposed criteria such as the need to be 'participating', 'talking' and 'not silent' – may not mean they are disengaged or failing to make a contribution (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). As such, demanding children to participate by using their voices in an adult-defined way, such as that implied in the Baker and Mason model, potentially constrains the possibilities for them to act (i.e. using non-verbal mechanisms) and could also lead to a misinterpretation of their vulnerability status via adult-imposed categorizations (ibid).

We argue that the notion that consumer vulnerability can simply be 'overcome' through the active agency of the individual vulnerable consumer to acknowledge, voice and work towards their 'freedom', as prescribed by the latest conceptualisations, cannot easily be applied to children. However, we also argue that alternative earlier conceptualisations of childhood and childhood consumption which falsely reduce the role of children's agency are also limited. In the socialization literature discussed above (e.g. John, 1999), for example, children are treated merely as passive dependents that pass through a pre-defined, standardized set of developmental stages on their route to cognitive maturity in adulthood. Both paradigms fail to capture the subtleties and peculiarities of childhood, and no current conceptualisation of consumer vulnerability has attempted to achieve this. We therefore

turn to the childhood studies literature, which has long grappled with this problematic, to move towards a new conceptualization of children as vulnerable consumers and a future research agenda.

### **The new sociology of childhood**

During the 1980s/90s, academics in childhood studies (mainly from sociology) began to converge on a sharp critique of previous research that had been dominated by the individualistic cognitive psychology models such as those that underpin the consumer socialization literature (John, 1999). They criticised these models for seeing adults as mature and complete and children as somehow less fully human (Tisdall and Punch, 2012) until they have achieved various thresholds of reasoning and understanding. Qvortrup (1994) pointed out that this thinking had led to what he saw as a rather alarming taken-for-granted assumption that children were 'human becomings' rather than 'human beings', and that children were seen as 'naturally' incompetent or incapable. He criticised Piaget, on whose work the socialization model is based, 'for justifying adulthood supremacy' (Tisdall and Punch, 2012, p.253). He asserted that this perspective could lead to worrying arguments that children should not have rights because they have limited rationality and should be viewed as inferior entities that must be 'socialized' into good citizens (Tisdall and Punch, 2012).

In light of these criticisms of the 'old' ideas, a 'new' sociology of childhood was proposed. The key tenets of the new paradigm were threefold. Firstly, childhood was considered a social construction - created within specific cultural and social conditions - rather than a fixed chronological and biological period (Kraftl, 2013). Secondly, 'children's social relationships were believed to be worthy of study in their own right, independent of the

perspective and concerns of adults' (Prout, 2005, p.60). The new paradigm heralded respect for children and childhood in the present rather than a future focus on adults and adulthood as the 'gold standard'. Thirdly, the approach argued that children must be seen as 'active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' (Prout, 2005, p.60). Prout (2011) later refers to this as an 'intense focus on the subjectivity of children' (p.6). Ultimately, the new paradigm emphasised that children were perceived as social actors and holders of rights rather than as passive dependents (Mayall 2002; Qvortrup, 1994). These concerns, voiced 20 to 30 years earlier, find echoes in Baker et al.'s (2012) 'situational' and 'context and community' views of consumer vulnerability.

The social constructionist turn of the 'new paradigm', which emphasised the representational nature of childhood, was initially viewed as a significant improvement on what Prout (2011, p.8) refers to as the 'biological reductionism' of approaches such as childhood socialization, which cede childhood to nature – 'children were thought of as part of nature until made part of the social' (Prout, 2011, p.7). Childhood as a social construction was a reverse discourse. However, this 'new' view of childhood brought its own problems, as many have noted (Ryan, 2008; Tisdall, 2012). According to Prout's (2005/2011) own critique, the new paradigm had attempted to avoid the problematic dualisms inherent in childhood, between children as agents versus childhood as social structure, for instance. However, the new paradigm's solution to 'biological reductionism' turned out to be a form of 'sociological reductionism' (Prout, 2011, p.8) in that it granted a monopoly to discourse (narrative, representation and symbolization) as the medium through which childhood is understood. This emphasis, Prout has concluded, 'is ultimately an overstatement' (ibid, p.8).

Others have agreed with Prout's critique, noting that despite its innovative claims, the paradigm continued 'to move in the groove of a binary logic that examines childhood through the lens of *either culture or nature*' (Ryan, 2011, p.440). Prout (2011, p.7) writes that any duality within childhood between culture and nature, or structure and agency, no matter towards which side the balance is tipped, cannot accurately reflect childhood because it seems 'to defy [this] division' as it is 'part natural and part social' – a conceptualisation that 'feels distinctly uncomfortable to the modernist mentality with its concern to dichotomize phenomena'.

As a result of these criticisms, the last few years have seen an interesting rebalancing of approaches to childhood within sociology and the launch of a 'new wave' of the new paradigm. The intention of the new wave is to finally break the grip of thinking about childhood in terms of dualisms; firstly by acknowledging that childhood has a truly hybrid character and straddles 'the culture/nature divide' (Prout, 2011, p.7) and that children cannot be conceptualised as either free agents *or* childhood as a social structure. Secondly new wave authors have moved beyond the original emphasis that children are 'beings' not 'becomings'; a critique of the socialization approach which saw adulthood as a destination for developing and therefore incomplete children. Authors such as Lee (1999) argue that childhood must recognise both being *and* becoming and that children, and indeed adults, should be viewed as 'in a continual search as human becomings' (Tisdall and Punch, 2012, p.254). For them, and indeed Prout, overemphasis on children as 'beings' leads to an uncomfortable sense that children are 'autonomous and independent person[s], as if it were possible to be human without belonging to a complex web of interdependencies' (Prout, 2011, p.8). These new wave advancements are key to our understanding of

childhood consumer vulnerability and to our critique of existing models of consumer vulnerability.

### **Towards a new conceptualisation of child consumer vulnerability**

In this section we lay out a new conceptualisation of child consumer vulnerability that has three strands. Firstly, our conceptualisation is theoretically underpinned by the challenging hybrid model of the new wave of the new sociology of childhood, which emphasises the fluidity and interrelation between the ‘assemblages’ of discourse and materiality which constitute the various contexts of childhood. The second strand, and one that comes as a consequence of this hybrid conceptualisation of childhood, is the requirement for an interdisciplinary research approach. The third strand is the very particular issue of how researchers should best access and interpret the voices of children as vulnerable consumers. In particular it emphasises the crucial importance of the extremely difficult task of deciding on the best methodologies to listen to and represent children’s voices and draws on the participation literature (e.g. Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Tisdall, 2012; Uprichard, 2010). We consider each of these strands from a research perspective in more detail below.

#### *Strand one: A hybrid theory of childhood*

Locating our reconceptualisation of vulnerable child consumers within the ‘new wave’ of understanding childhood, we take as our starting point its premise that childhood is a complex phenomenon ‘not readily reducible to one end or the other of a polar separation’ (Prout, 2011, p.8). We thus acknowledge the importance of materiality *and* discourse within the ‘network’ or ‘assemblage’ of childhood (Prout, 2011) and that childhood is a fluid, unstable and sometimes conflicting phenomenon constantly emerging from a set of relations. We find helpful Prout’s (2011) and Gallacher and Gallagher’s (2008) leaning on

Deleuze (e.g. 1994) to expand on this 'relational' concept; in which childhood is not 'a collection of autonomous, self-contained subjects possessed of both agency and knowledge, but as a plethora of *events*' (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008, p.511); 'a process, always-ready underway' (ibid, p.510). We also point to Ryan's (2011) description of the social and cultural structures in which children live as being part of an interwoven grid or lattice that cannot be separated from their existence as active agents with a voice to be heard and a part to play in the construction of their own lives.

To demonstrate this hybrid perspective, Prout (2005/2011) provides the example of examining childhood within the school context, which is made up of various households, other schools, playgrounds, afterschool clubs, firms, local authorities, trade unions, ministries, courts and so on: 'People cross these boundaries bringing with them different and conflicting ideas, experiences, ideals, values and visions (all the things that make up discourses) and different material resources' (2011, p.11). He continues:

*The hybrid 'actants', people and things, that flow in and between different settings all play a part in constructing what emerges as 'childhood' and 'adulthood' there. It is by tracing these flows that we can come to understand them better (p.11).*

Neither the societal structures nor the 'actants' should be given precedence when understanding the social life of the child in any context.

Applied to children's consumer vulnerability, this 'hybrid' perspective suggests that there should be multiple access points to understanding childhood vulnerability, i.e. from the perspectives of 'class' *and* 'state', 'individual' *and* 'environmental', 'actual' *and* 'perceived'. Our approach emphasises the interrelation between these perspectives and de-emphasises any particular one. Indeed, as noted by Nairn et al. (2006), primary school children's

reactions to consumer goods and marketing messages are inextricable from the behaviour of their friends, their status in the class, their family's values and practices as well as the materiality of the message and media themselves. Their relationship with, and vulnerability to marketing goes well beyond their understanding of a TV commercial. As such we propose that children's vulnerability as consumers should be considered through the fluid interrelationship between, for example, the practice of marketers, the structure (and material content) of the market, culturally-specific meanings associated with consumption, children's own performances of their various consumption practices and consequent re-affirmation of their associated meanings. The conceptualisation of child consumption vulnerability should also include the overlapping practices of other important influencers on children's consumption, such as parents, peers, teachers and extended family members, each of whom are actants and co-constructors of the context in which a child's consumer vulnerability might exist (e.g. Nairn and Spotswood, forthcoming).

We acknowledge that previous models of consumer vulnerability have attempted to embrace the importance of both macro *and* micro factors (Commuri & Ekinici, 2008; Schulz & Holbrook, 2009), but the tendency has been for the 'macro' and 'micro' to be treated as separate entities without any consideration for how they interrelate. Indeed, Schulz and Holbrook's matrix acts to separate rather than blend its various elements. Baker and Mason's (2012) 'conceptual model of a process theory of consumer vulnerability and resilience' (p.548) also includes external forces and events as well as individual factors (consumer resilience), but rather than embracing a fluidity or assemblage between structures and consumer agency, it artificially separates these phenomena.

In order to take this strand forward we suggest that researchers of child consumer vulnerability explore the use of a wide variety of theoretical frameworks which have been designed to grasp the interrelationship between structure and agency in human lives. These include Bourdieu's Habitus (1985), Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory, Social Practices Theory (e.g. Schatzki, 1996) and Latour's (1993) concept of 'actor-network'. Structuration theory and the Habitus posit that people are constantly engaged in a process of constructing and modifying the social structures of their social system, which in turn influence and determine individual behaviours (Algesheimer & Gurau, 2008) in a mutual process of influence which favours neither agency nor structure. Social Practices Theory develops these ideas and treats individuals as carriers and performers of practices, who through their performance, or lack thereof, can shape the structure of the practice but who are also constrained in their daily activities by the existence and make-up of the various practices with which they come into contact. Actor-network theory is the 'strategy' recommended by Prout (2011, p.8) because it draws attention to 'the materials and the practices from which an endless stream of new phenomena, including distinction and dichotomies, are generated and emerge'. These theories potentially provide an access point for grappling with the complex interrelationship of structure and agency on childhood when considering children as vulnerable consumers.

#### *Strand two: Research trans-disciplinarity*

Given the multi-layered and fluid nature of childhood that we propose, we agree with the various 'childhood studies' authors who have noted that in order to understand the mutual influence between the agency and structures which comprise childhood, then future research must be interdisciplinary (Prout, 2005, 2011; Ryan, 2008; Thorne, 2007; Tisdall and



Punch, 2012). Cultural, sociological and psychological perspectives in partnership, for example, will be necessary to move towards a suitably holistic understanding of childhood consumer vulnerability, and Prout (2011) also recommends extending collaborative work so that human geography, anthropology and history also play a part.

Much has been written about the potential for interdisciplinary research collaboration, and its problems have been noted (Dauphinee & Martin, 2000) as well as the benefits that may accrue by truly overcoming disciplinary 'myopia' for creative and innovative new research directions and the generation of knowledge (Robertson, Martin & Singer, 2003; Rosenfield, 1992). However, it has been noted that creative collaboration in research requires more than different scientists working on the same problem as part of the same team. Rather, a truly 'trans'-disciplinary approach must transcend 'separate conceptual, theoretical, and methodological orientations in order to develop a shared approach to the research, building on a common conceptual framework' (Rosenfield, 1992, p.1351). With this in mind, we note that previous conceptualisations of consumer vulnerability, despite claiming multi-dimensionality, have demonstrated a very dominant 'access point' to their understanding of consumer vulnerability; namely they have tended to be favour a cognitive psychology paradigm. We argue that a trans-disciplinary research agenda, which involves true collaboration rather than just disciplines working in tandem, may overcome such conceptual imbalance and help lead to a more hybridized approach. The Child and Teen Consumption Movement (2015)<sup>1</sup> is an example of a current scholarly initiative that encourages what they refer to as pluri-disciplinary research into children's consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://childandteenconsumption.org/pages/about-us>

### *Strand three: Voice*

The Baker and Mason (2012) model claims it can 'begin to more fully explore the relationships between upstream pressures and the experience of vulnerability' beginning with voiced, experienced vulnerability. However, with children (including disabled children (Tisdall, 2012)), this reliance on adult-defined notions of the participatory voice is highly problematic. Indeed Tisdall (2012, p.188) notes that a reliance on children's voices 'has distinct disadvantages and exclusionary aspects'. It might marginalise children because it requires children to be rational, articulate, knowledgeable and capable of speaking for themselves, and risks privileging 'comprehensible verbal utterances over other forms of communication' (p.185).

We suggest that there is an urgent need for a review of innovative methodologies for researching the experiences of child consumers. Although vastly improved compared with the emphasis in developmental psychology on 'the child' as an object of scientific research, wherein 'researchers expect to come to know its essential qualities through rigorous examination of its properties under controlled circumstances' (Hogan, 2005, p.25), methodologies which blindly hail children's 'voices' as the end-point of interpretation and analysis are also problematic. Although it is vital to include their voices and acknowledge children's roles as active agents in an understanding of the socio-cultural structures which also construct modern childhood, this should be achieved within a framework which allows for a child-centric interpretation of 'voice'. For example, 'voice' may not be verbal and should not need to be provided in ways that fit with adult-constructed ideas of communication or participation. It should also not be the subject of the power-based demands of adults (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Uprichard, 2010). One suggestion, not

without practical drawbacks, is to use children themselves as researchers (Sinclair, 2004).

This might enable social scientists to move beyond constructions of 'researcher' and 'participant' that are based on adult-child divisions (Tisdall, 2010).

Beyond this we suggest that more researchers might explore the use of discourse analysis in accessing and representing children's voices as consumers. Discourse analytical approaches can enable researchers to move beyond the apparent meaning of *what* children say (and how they say it) to an examination of the construction of the language within the context of existing practices and cultural structures in which the various performances of childhood, including children's consumption, are situated. Applying such a methodology to children's talk is relatively rare in children's consumption studies (Freeman, 2009; Sparrman, 2009) and would be a welcome addition in line with thinking from the new paradigm.

We hope that our new three strand conceptualization outlined above may lead to a development of Mason and Baker's (2012) overall model of consumer vulnerability that is able to include children.

### **Policy Implications**

This new conceptualisation of the vulnerability of child consumers has profound implications for policies related to marketing to children. Past policy responses to vulnerable child consumers have often emanated from old conceptualisations of consumer vulnerability; most notably class-based notions of disadvantage (Andreasen, 1975, 1976, 1993) and information processing models from cognitive psychology (John, 1999; Ringold, 2005). In line with this, regulations have been concentrated on advertising and marketing communications and have tended to emphasise protection and censorship (e.g. Silverglade,

1991). Some countries such as Sweden have banned all advertising to children below the age of 12 whilst others have restricted advertising of certain products, e.g. the UK where food high in salt, sugar and fat may no longer be advertised in and around TV programmes of particular appeal to children under the age of 16.

The weakness of these theoretical underpinnings is beginning to emerge in policy circles. Consumer groups have pointed out that the age at which children are no longer deemed to need protection from marketing varies wildly from 8 to 18 across different international marketing codes (Pitt, 2010) whilst research into children's capability for processing new advertising formats such as advergames (Nairn and Hang, 2012) has thrown doubt on the conclusions of the socialisation literature that adolescents are no more vulnerable than adults (Ringold, 2005).

On the other hand the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is viewed as 'the most significant recent policy development intended to promote and protect children's rights' (Franklin, 1995, p.16) draws more on the notions of the 'agentic' consumer portrayed in the 'new sociology of childhood' or Baker et al.'s (2012) 'community and context' vision of vulnerability and this has begun to filter through to government policy in some countries. The UK Children's Act 2004, for example, stipulates that a new Children's Commissioner must consult with children (Section 2:4) and the principle of child participation has become woven into policy in education, health and social care (Nairn and Clarke, 2012) within a political agenda that sees citizens as 'consumers' of public services. Organisations such as Barnardo's, Save the Children and The Children's Society regularly consult children (Alderson and Morrow, 2004) and the *Every Child Matters* (2003) government consultation paper stated that, 'Real service improvement is only attainable

through involving children and young people and listening to their views' (p. 10). Yet, as we might have predicted from our examination of vulnerable child consumers, this participatory agenda including children's voices has proved hard to implement. A case in point is the story of the 'Tell Us' survey. The survey - begun in 2006 and designed to make children less vulnerable in the context of educational provision – asked children aged 8 to 18 about their teachers, their teaching, their school, the services they receive, and their lives. However, in June 2010, Local Authorities were told to stop children participating: 'The Government has decided to stop the delivery of the "Tell Us" Survey as part of its commitment to reduce the burdens which data collection imposes on schools and local authorities'. Whilst on one level this would appear to be a cost-saving response it may also be symptomatic of the complexity inherent in adults accessing and representing children's voices. It seems that the duality criticised by the new sociology of childhood is proving to be unhelpful for the pragmatic decisions made by marketing policy makers: They are unclear whether children should be viewed as 'agents' with voices or a passive 'class' to be protected.

This lack of clarity seems to point to the vital necessity of a clear conceptual model of the nature child consumer vulnerability. Without one, policy is likely to be flawed or unworkable. It is our hope that our new conceptualisation of childhood consumer vulnerability, which is underpinned by a view of childhood as fluid and hybrid; which encompasses a trans-disciplinary approach to understanding vulnerability; and which seeks new and robust methods through which to capture and represent the 'authentic' voices of children, may go some way towards a completely new approach to policies to help children avoid consumer vulnerability. 'Greater emphasis will be needed on the intricacies,

complexities, tensions, ambiguities and ambivalences of children and young people's lives...'

(Tisdall and Punch, 2012, p.259).

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